

The World of James Bond: The Lives and Times of 007, by Jeremy Black

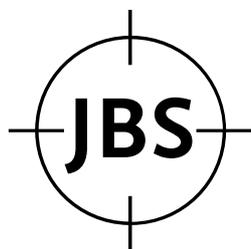
(Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pp. 280)

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The world has been shaken and stirred, if the pun can be excused, by a number of excellent academic studies on James Bond, Ian Fleming, and the longest franchise in the history of film. Collections such as *The James Bond Phenomenon* (2003) and *Revisioning 007* (2010) edited by Christoph Lindner, and Klaus Dodds and Lisa Funnell's monograph, *Geographies, Genders, and Geopolitics of James Bond* (2017), are outstanding contributions to the field. Also edited by Lisa Funnell, *For His Eyes Only: The Women of James Bond* (2015) is the first academic collection dedicated to female characters in the James Bond books and films.

It may seem strange, therefore, to read, as we do in Jeremy Black's latest book on Bond, that "[t]here is extensive literature on Bond, though most of it is of the exploitation type and makes scant attempt to consider adequately Bond's context and the change in the plots and character."¹ Black's dismissal of existing literature on Bond derives, however, from his deliberate distance from cultural and queer studies, those particular fields of study from which a good deal of recent scholarship on Bond has come. Instead, Black promises to offer "a 'histor-

1 Please note that page references after quotations are missing due to the fact that the publisher opted to send the editors of *IJJBS* a link to the e-book version in place of a hard review copy.



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ian's take" on Bond, drawing on his expertise to provide an important historical contextualisation of both Fleming's novels and short stories, as well as the EON-produced films. Indeed, Black's comprehensive study is commendable for the ease with which he brings together an accurate historical context for these cultural productions. In doing so, Black also draws attention to the permeable boundaries between culture and history, presenting Bond as both "unchanging" and "obliged to respond to these transformations" arguing that "Bond provides a fascinating source for changing views about the world."

Black is spot on, for instance, in grounding the origins of Bond at a critical moment in British history: Britain's increasingly marginal and insular position after the decline of the Empire is a theme frequently brought up by Bond's adversaries, and Britain's necessary reliance on America is projected onto the interdependence established between MI6 and the CIA in Fleming's novels. The cinematic Bond is more self-assured than his literary predecessor, and we do not sense the political, historical, and moral crisis Bond embodies in the books. While Bond is frequently shown to save America in the course of his exploits, Black contends that, "in fact, it was America that saved Bond, just as America had helped save Britain and Western values, both in World War II and in the Cold War." The austerity measures in place in post-war Britain also represent the historical background for the frequent references to material luxuries in the Bond books:

Writing in the shadow of World War II and for that generation, Fleming produced a romance that resonated. In some respects, Fleming and Bond were aspects of the Conservative reaction against Labour rule. The reaction was particularly seen in the end of rationing and the embrace of affluence, notably with a loosening of credit restrictions and the encouragement of borrowing through hire purchase. The emphasis on material goods in the Bond novels, the opulence in the life of a secret agent, matched this moment, mood, and interest.

While Black defines "Fleming, and therefore Bond [as] a key aspect of the Anglo-Americanism that was so important to the contours of Cold War culture in the late 1950s," he is also able to draw attention to Fleming's complex understandings of war politics beyond the East/West Cold War binary, exposing, instead, links between the KGB, the Mafia, Black Power, global terrorism, and drug trafficking, even though, as he claims, in *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1965), "Fleming captured Castro's dependence on a sense of siege, but not the vigor of Castro's secret

police.” Similarly, a critical reading of Fleming’s own political views reveals a certain conservatism with regards to modernity and modern life. For instance, in *From Russia with Love* (1957), Bond/Fleming is very critical of the modern architectural features imposed on the old, European side of Istanbul, lamenting the damage that modernity has caused to the country’s traditional aesthetics. A similar stance is also behind “his choice of the architect of London Modernism for the naming of his villain Goldfinger” in the eponymous 1959 novel.

Where Bond appears to be less conservative, in Black’s view, is in sex and gender politics. Prior to this publication, Black had already intimated that Bond might indeed be a feminist: “Throughout Fleming’s series, Bond admires female partners who are not only sexually liberated and demanding as him, but independent, resourceful and tough enough to help him defeat villains,” he wrote in *The Telegraph* (18 January 2017). “Far from misogynistic in attitude, Bond was ahead of his time.” However, in *The World of James Bond*, Black could have discussed in more detail the historical relationship between the Bond books and the feminist movement, as his perspective on the historical foundations of Bond’s gender politics would be extremely useful for further research in the field. Black does remind us, though, that as Bond has sex with fifty-eight women from *Dr. No* (1962) to *Spectre* (2015), there are unacceptable moments of misogyny throughout the film franchise, especially when viewed through a contemporary standpoint: with its very weak portrayals of the naïve Mary Goodnight and the submissive Andrea Anders, for instance, he cites the filmic *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1975) as an example of “a very offhand attitude to women.” Notwithstanding the complexities attached to the question of gender in the Bond cultural productions, Black rightly draws attention to readings of Fleming that have too often relied on “selective quotation” to misconstrue arguments about Fleming’s and Bond’s misogyny. Most importantly, Black notes the books’ modern emphasis on desire-led sexual relations and, within them, on mutual pleasure: “There is much male fantasy here but it is central to the image of Bond’s sexuality that he gives, as well as receives, pleasure.” As noted by other critics in the past, Black reinforces a notion that “Fleming’s depiction of women who were not constrained or defined by the search for matrimony and motherhood [...] contrasted with the women in the adventure stories of his childhood,” namely the works of “clubland writers” Eric Ambler, John Buchan, and Graham Greene. It is not just Black’s encyclopaedic knowledge of politics that is brought to bear on his most recent work on Bond, but his understanding of the important reciprocal influences of other aspects of popular culture – from the Beatles phenomenon to

the space age fascination of *Star Wars*. Although the lack of page references in quotations may make this a difficult tool to use for academic research, as a crossover book, *The World of James Bond* will be a good addition to those interested in Bond outside of academia.

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